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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001506

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION GROUPS AL WIFAQ, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ACTION SOCIETY, VOTE TO REGISTER WITH GOVERNMENT

REF: A. MANAMA 1347

[B](#). MANAMA 1091

[C](#). MANAMA 111

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) Leading opposition societies Al Wifaq and the National Democratic Action Society (NDAS) in separate votes October 6 approved proposals to register with the government under the new political societies law. Al Wifaq members approved the measure by a resounding 87 percent, and a majority of 66 percent of NDAS members voted in favor. Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa and Justice Minister Al Sitry both publicly welcomed the decisions to register and called for full participation in the 2006 parliamentary elections. Al Wifaq also voted to change its internal structure, creating a three-branch system composed of a board, consultative council, and "judiciary" to settle disagreements between the board and the council. President Shaikh Ali Salman said the new structure ensured decision-making is done collectively and not just by the board. An Al Wifaq political committee member told us that Al Wifaq will become a smaller, nimbler political organization with more centrist policy positions. He affirmed that Al Wifaq will participate in the coming parliamentary elections. NDAS President Ibrahim Sharif told us his organization had still not taken a decision on the elections, saying he hoped the government would carry out some electoral redistricting to more accurately reflect the principle of "one man one vote." End Summary.

Boycotting Societies Vote to Register

[2](#). (U) Opposition societies Al Wifaq and the National Democratic Action Society voted separately October 6 to register with the Ministry of Justice under the provisions of Bahrain's political societies law, which entered into force in July 2005 (Ref B). In an extraordinary general assembly held in the Saar meeting hall, 927 of 1062 Al Wifaq members present at the meeting voted in favor of registration, a landslide of 87 percent. (Note: The 1062 participants represent about two-thirds of Al Wifaq's traditional total of active, dues-paying members of about 1700.) President Shaikh Ali Salman praised the members' willingness to register with the government, saying it demonstrated their readiness to deal with any political issues they face. Salman cautioned, however, that the organization's decision to register did not imply an impending decision to participate in the October 2006 parliamentary elections, saying this was "another matter."

[3](#). (U) Members of the National Democratic Action Society (NDAS) voted the same day to register with the government by a vote of 160 of 242, a majority of 66 percent. They also voted to change the name of the organization to Al Wa'ad, "The Promise." (Note: The 242 voters is about the same number of members that have participated in other society activities. NDAS claims about 600 total members, but only some 250 are active, dues-paying members.)

PM Welcomes Decisions

[4](#). (U) Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa October 15 publicly praised the decisions of political societies to register with the government. He called for the participation of all political societies in the 2006 parliamentary elections. He hailed the role of parliament and pledged stronger cooperation between the executive and legislative branches. Justice Minister Dr. Mohammed Al Sitry also welcomed the societies' decisions to register. He pointed out that the law specifically grants societies the right to carry out political activities, a new development. Before passage of the law, there was no legal basis for societies to conduct political work in the country, although the government permitted political societies to operate under the 1989 societies law, which was supposed to cover social organizations only.

More Democratic Internal Framework for Al Wifaq

15. (U) Al Wifaq members also voted October 13 to install a new internal structure for the organization. The move creates three branches - a president with a board of directors appointed by the president; a "shura," or consultative, council to serve as a legislature; and a judiciary to mediate and settle disagreements between the executive and legislature. A general assembly composed of representatives from every village/neighborhood will vote for the president and the 50 members of the shura council. The judiciary will be composed of appointed members at least 30 years old who are known to have sound judgment. (Note: Judiciary members will not be shariah law scholars.) Both the president and the shura council can propose new rules and policies and the shura council will vote on them. The president can veto a measure passed by the shura, but the shura can override the veto by a vote of two-thirds of its members. Previously, Al Wifaq was governed only by a board of directors and a president selected by the board.

16. (U) Salman said publicly that the new structure is the framework of a party and will improve the quality of political work carried out by the society. It will give more power to members, he stated, ensuring that decision-making is made collectively and not just by the board. The press reported October 16 that Salman nominated himself for the position of president.

Al Wifaq to Participate in Elections

17. (C) Al Wifaq political committee member Nizar Al Qari (protect throughout) told Pol/Econ chief October 15 that the organization will be smaller than it has been previously, when there were some 30,000 paid-up members and 40,000 supporters. (Comment: The membership figures are misleading. While technically accurate, the 30,000 number comes as a result of a membership drive in early 2004 in support of a petition for constitutional change. As noted above, active, dues-paying members number about 1700.) Smaller numbers will allow the society to be more nimble politically. Al Qari said that businessmen Faisal Jawad and Nizar Al Baharna are responsible for bringing a core of moderate business people into society to develop centrist political and economic policies. The focus of Al Wifaq's activities will be on promoting the interests of members and the Shia community more broadly from within the system rather than from the outside via demonstrations and confrontation.

18. (C) In response to Pol/Econ chief's question, Al Qari said, "Yes, we will participate in parliamentary and municipal elections." Either Al Wifaq members themselves will run for office or the organization will throw its support behind candidates with similar policy positions. He cited MPs Abdul Nabi Salman and Abdul Hadi Marhoon as being politicians Al Wifaq would support. Al Wifaq is no longer insisting on a concession from the King to justify a decision to participate. Al Qari said they are ready to engage now. Al Wifaq will seek to create opportunities in the Council of Representatives for its constituents and not rely upon gestures from the King.

Closing the Credibility Gap

19. (C) Al Qari emphasized that Al Wifaq is trying to "close the gap" with the royal family to establish confidence and credibility, and even cooperation in some areas (which he did not specify). Al Wifaq is studying "loyal oppositions" in other countries to learn how to work within system from a position of opposition. He commented that the credibility gap is large, saying that the royal family is suspicious of the loyalty of all Shia in Bahrain, whether from local Bahraini or Iranian origin. Morocco's government is a model for Al Wifaq, Al Qari said, because the Prime Minister is a former exile and convicted torturers formerly with the security services have been put in jail.

110. (C) Al Qari said that former Al Wifaq board members Hassan Mushaima and Abdul Jalil Singace, whose resignations still have not been accepted by the group, will try to create a "civil rights movement" among Shia, not a competing political society. The Al Wifaq board continues to coordinate with Mushaima and Singace. Faisal Jawad told the Ambassador October 15 that the board had consulted with Mushaima and Singace on the proposed party framework that was approved on October 13, and even accepted one of their recommendations. However, Al Qari said that Al Wifaq will no longer try to rein in and protect the more extreme elements of the Shia community, saying "Let the Bahrain National Security Agency and police do their job, not Al Wifaq."

Al Wa'ad Remains Undecided About Elections

11. (C) Al Wa'ad (former NDAS) President Ibrahim Sharif told Pol/Econ chief October 17 that the one-third of the society's members who voted against registration respect the will of the majority and have not indicated any intention of leaving the group. The board deliberately left vague some of the articles of registration that will be deposited with the Ministry of Justice, in particular the minimum age of membership. He noted that under the political societies law, members must be 21 years of age or older, whereas under the 1989 societies law, the minimum age of membership was 18. In its internal regulations, Al Wa'ad will require that voting members be 21 while non-voting members must be at least 18. (Note: Justice Minister Al Sitry has hinted publicly that he would not object to an arrangement such as that described by Sharif.)

12. (C) Sharif said it was still too early to say whether Al Wa'ad would participate in parliamentary and municipal elections in 2006. The October 6 vote was on registration only, not election participation. There are strong advocates within Al Wa'ad for and against participation. Sharif said he hopes the King will address some of the most blatant shortcomings in Bahrain's election law; doing so would encourage Al Wa'ad to participate. He cited electoral district boundaries as the single most problematic provision in the election law. While Sharif does not expect the King or parliament to draw new boundaries that accurately reflect the principle of "one man one vote," he thought some redistricting would create the right political environment for Al Wa'ad and others to participate fully in the elections.

Comment

13. (C) As described Ref A, the July law put opposition political societies on the defensive. Advocates for participation from inside Al Wifaq and Al Wa'ad, most importantly the leadership of both groups, used the law's requirement to register with the government as an opportunity to promote their points of view - successfully, in both cases. Al Wifaq's apparent decisions to moderate its policies and participate in parliamentary elections will give a huge boost to Bahrain's fledgling democracy and added legitimacy to parliament. Al Wa'ad's Sharif appears to be steering his society in the same direction, but he is still holding out for some government gesture on redistricting. Momentum is building for full participation in parliamentary elections, now just 12 months away.

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